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Dance

Jody Weber



Dance is extraordinary in that it is experienced in the moment, leaving an imprint in the mind's eye of the audience. It is my challenge as a choreographer to build images that will last in the mind and heart far beyond that brief moment in the theater. The choreographer's initial work is hidden behind the closed doors of a dance studio. Although much of the process is intensely personal, my artistic field requires that I develop a community of dedicated and highly-trained dancers who are committed to my vision. We are often in physical contact; we sweat, we get tired, we step on each other's feet, we open ourselves emotionally in order to express ourselves through our bodies in motion, and we continue to work together regardless of these challenges. Six committed women work with me every week of the year, offering their time and talent with extraordinary generosity.

Each choreographic project requires that I first find space to let ideas percolate, exploring movement ideas that may or may not prove fruitful. This is one of my greatest challenges, as both time and studio space is difficult to procure. Studio space that is large enough for group work (a minimum of 1200 square feet) is available at only three studios in Boston and costs range from twelve to fifteen dollars per rehearsal hour. Currently, I hold ongoing rehearsals for my company at Mass Motion in Allston and do my preparations in any space I can find including kitchens, living rooms, lobbies, and sometimes the hallway outside my office. My work is varied, with a strong emphasis on the impact of scientific discovery, historical events, and cultural phenomenon on the lives of individual people. My process often begins with very broad concepts, moving slowly toward more specific ideas. During the summer months I spend intensive periods working four to six hours per day in the dance studio. This work generates

large quantities of raw material. Video is a fundamental tool that helps me edit as I select material to bring to my company of dancers. The dancers participate in the creative process by following choreographic structures and bringing diversity through their unique physical abilities. Slowly, the movement ideas find structure through spatial organization and sequencing. As the studio process unfolds, I am busy working on the overall structure of the dance; finding music, writing sound scores, and considering text and costume design. Lastly, I must consider how each of these components will interact through their juxtaposition within the



Of Bones
and Marrow.

whole dance. A short work, perhaps five to seven minutes, typically takes four months to create. Longer works, twenty to thirty minutes, often develop over twelve to eighteen months. Each concert evening represents years of creative work condensed into the most ephemeral moment of experience for the audience, and for me and my dancers. It is perhaps this very moment, both fragile in its brevity and powerful in its experience, that compels me to return to the studio to begin again.

—Jody Weber is Assistant Professor of Theater and Dance.



Left, *Of Bones and Marrow*.



Left and below, *Core Impasse*.

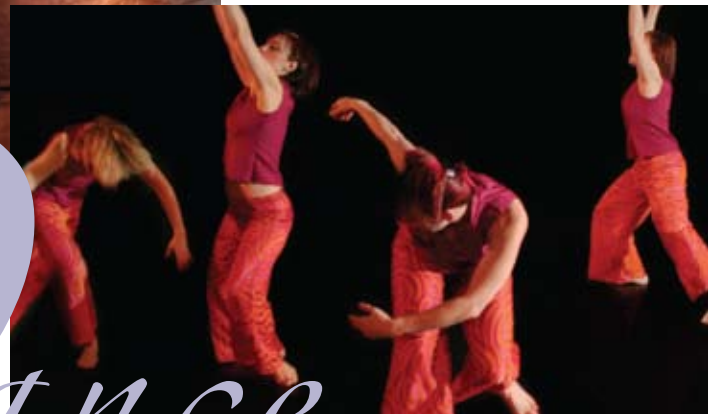


Above and inset,
The Raven's Rapport.





Left and below, *Ley Lines*.



Dance



Above and inset, *Steadfast Season*.

Dance photographs by Chris Engles.





CORE IMPASSE

The concept for this dance developed after a trip to Alaska in 2005. Alaska is an extraordinary place and I was powerfully moved by my experiences. Despite spending my adult life in urban areas, I have always had a deep kinship for natural settings.

However, in our day to day lives I find that I often have a perception of myself as separate or in some way distinct from the forces of the natural world. On a deserted beach in Alaska's Lake Clark National Park, I found myself between two grizzly bears at very close range. This experience reminded me at a fundamental level that in terms of the natural world we are part of the whole- not separate from it. Although we continue to alter our environment to suit our needs, in the end we cannot deny our relationship to all of the natural systems present on the planet. I was also aware of a certain balance between the number of people that lived in Alaska and the land, something I had never experienced in the lower 48. It seemed to me at the time that we have removed ourselves so far from this balance and understanding of our relationship to the natural world that we are creating a great global disaster in terms of climate, pollution and overpopulation. The title **Core Impasse** refers to how we live and see ourselves, our core perceptions, and the impasse that we must transcend to insure our own future here on earth.



LEY LINES

The concept for **Ley Lines** began when I started to think about maps, which led me to broader questions surrounding how we find our way in the world. The curious thing about contemporary maps and global positioning is that they are both tremendously specific and simultaneously utterly

unrelated to one's experience of place. A series of books that I read during the summer of 2006 began a fascinating journey of mapping and understanding where you are and where you are going. I ended this investigation reading about the Pemako region of Tibet, one of the last unmapped regions of the world in the late 1990s. The region was mapped only through an ancient image of a goddess—her body the features of the land. The juxtaposition of femininity, physicality and place was of interest to me. So I began to create **Ley Lines**. In this piece a woman who can easily locate her home, job and neighborhood finds herself lost and asks, "How did I get here?" Her answer and her ability to locate herself lie outside the realm of linear thought and require a subtle yet courageous inner journey.



OF BONES AND MARROW

Of Bones and Marrow emerged from my interest in our relationship to the natural world and our unfolding environmental crisis. Since everything on this planet is essentially made of the same fundamental matter, and this matter is constantly

exchanged, I began to wonder why we so vehemently structure our view of ourselves as separate from the natural world. It seemed that even the very act of speaking of the environment and its processes, as outside of ourselves, created a division of our own construction. The choreographic process for **Of Bones and Marrow** has been extensive. The time, from its inception to its premiere exceeded nine months and I have continued to work on it for an additional nine months. The structure of the dance moves between relationship and disjuncture and as it progresses this division slowly collapses. The work includes a sound score with five distinct pieces of music and a work of poetry written by Andrew Arnett.



STEADFAST SEASON

Steadfast Season is a reflection on the power and complexity of long-term relationships. Like many people in my generation, my parents were divorced, and I have always been curious about the internal negotiations that sustain longevity in a marriage. I modeled the dance on my

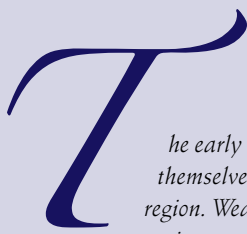
grandparents whose marriage lasted more than sixty-five years. The structure of this dance is strongly embedded in its spatial pattern which is confined within a small rectangular "room" of light, and its movement patterns which are exchanged between the dancers with individual variation. The dance was originally performed by a man and a woman, but subsequently I have re-set it with two women.



THE RAVEN'S RAPPORT

This duet incorporated gorgeous wolf and raven masks created by artist, Laura McPherson. It was a strange and fascinating journey for me that required a deep trust in the creative process. Sometimes the choreographic process is clear and you know exactly what you want to create. Sometimes

the experience is like walking through a dark house where you sense your surroundings, but they are shadowy and undefined. That was the case with **The Raven's Rapport**. The image of a wolf literally beckoned me from a dream, and then an absolutely fantastical series of events unfolded across the next three months involving wolves and ravens which culminated in a direct experience with two actual wolves in the wild. For me, the raven and the wolf are symbolic of two aspects of our nature—the wolf reflects a deep and ancient predatory nature, and the raven represents our ability to see beyond our more intellectual or rational side. In the wild these two animals often work together in the hunt. Despite their need for one another, their relationship is dangerous for the raven who must remain vigilant or risk death.



he early nineteenth century was a highly prosperous and optimistic time in the city of Boston. The citizens pledged themselves to the new republic and many of Boston's successful merchants had taken up political positions to govern the region. Wealth had been established through the shipping industry and would shift and expand to the textile industry creating an upper class of affluent Bostonians. These citizens sought a place for their city in the young country and began to define themselves through culture and higher learning. They believed that "the well born and the good" had the responsibility of shaping the city's artistic and intellectual communities. An Athenian model appealed to the Bostonians in its references to democracy, high culture and learning. A visitor exclaimed, "There is scarcely a night in the year when some lecture is not delivered in Boston. They enjoy a lecture here as people elsewhere enjoy the theatre. It is an elegant taste, and, I am sure, productive of good." Although this first inclination toward an Athenian model adopted ideals of the city state, it was Boston's upper-class women who would return to images of Ancient Greece as they redefined their relationship to their own bodies and minds. As the Women's Movement swept through the city in the nineteenth-century, it cleared a path for physical culture and greater expressive freedom that eventually awakened interest in the young art of expressive dance.

The dancing master was already present in nineteenth century Boston and had earned his place within the upper classes, but his presence was not without controversy. Boston's Puritan inception continued to play a role in questions regarding the body, particularly for pleasure. The Puritans' conviction in the Calvinist ideals of predestination and a harsh and judgmental deity, left them opposed to any sort of leisure activity that might distract from one's calling in life. Dance was of particular suspicion because of its association with the body and the possibility of the pleasures of physical activity encouraging sexual desire. Although the Puritans condemned dance in general, it was considered acceptable in the privacy of an individual's home. Because of their English roots, the Puritans recognized dance as a means of teaching manners and discipline. Ministers such as Cotton Mather felt the need to speak out against mixed dancing. But, as author Ann Wagner points out, his stance was defensive implying that public opinion was not wholly on his side. The Puritans felt that if children were taught dancing it should be in same sex groupings and conducted by a dancing master of "grave" disposition.

Although these anti-dance sentiments, directed particularly at balls, continued throughout the nineteenth century, Boston's upper-class citizens adopted dance as an important component of social grace and an indicator of good breeding. This generation was less susceptible to images of a wrathful god, and Unitarian ministers began replacing Congregationalists with a more humanistic approach to religion. As scientific theories explained many of the natural disasters previously attributed to a harsh unforgiving god, humanism and intellectualism rose among Boston's upper classes.

The clergymen of nineteenth-century Boston continued to oppose dancing as idleness at best and a "carnal activity" at worst. Their sermons and tracts against dances are well documented, yet these protests did not have any profound impact on Boston's wealthy citizens. Despite the controversy over balls and mixed couple dancing, the activity was generally accepted by Bostonians and embraced as an important component of social interaction.

Professional dance, however, was much less certain of widespread acceptance. The Bostonians celebrated the talented European danseuse, but did not see professional dance as a worthy career for their daughters. When Fanny Elssler danced for the first time in Boston on September 7, 1840, she was preceded by her reputation and caused the normally "staid citizens" to indulge "in various acts of enthusiasm...many actually walked before the Tremont House for hours, in hopes that the divinity would show herself at the window." Elssler's extraordinary skill is widely celebrated and she clearly captivated audiences in America, but institutions to rigorously train American dancers were mostly absent in Boston in the nineteenth century. The profession of dance was considered unacceptable for upper-class Bostonian girls.

Despite Boston's image of itself as a city of intellectual curiosity and cultural sophistication, women had still not acquired the freedom to participate fully in society. Women were still bound by restrictions on the body, expression and education. This early nineteenth-century environment in Boston hardly seemed to offer a foundation for the emergence of expressive dance in the early twentieth century. And yet the need for self-expression and acceptance of the body as beautiful, even spiritual, flourished in just a few short decades. This transition is even more surprising given the fact that professional dance was a morally suspicious practice at best in nineteenth century America. Powerful changes shifted the cultural scene at the turn of the century clearing a path for the great pioneers of expressive dance to emerge.

Although this story is often told through the exceptional work of dance pioneers such as Isadora Duncan and Ruth St.Denis, it nevertheless was unfolding in communities across the nation. The first schools of expressive dance in Boston were deeply connected to Boston's upper-class society. Boston's regional dance pioneers forged powerful relationships with their community that shaped their broader work in terms of education, choreography and advocacy. An investigation of their schools, artistic work and audience development provides insight into the development of expressive movement both regionally and nationally.

—taken from the introduction to Dr. Weber's forthcoming book,
Dance in the Athens of America, Cambria Press, Amherst, NY.